

THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

The Second Creation

July 6, 1997

John M. Buchanan

We hunger for communities of meaning that can transcend the individualism and the selfishness that we see around us and that will provide an ethical and spiritual framework that gives our lives some higher purpose.... It is the sense of the intrinsic worth of human beings and of our connection to something higher to which biblical religions refer when speaking of human beings as created in the image of God.... I am calling for a "politics of the image of God," an attempt to reconstruct the world in a way that really takes seriously the uniqueness and preciousness of every human being and our connection to a higher ethical and spiritual purpose that gives meaning to our lives.

Michael Lerner

The Politics of Meaning:

Restoring Hope and Possibility in an Age of Cynicism

FOURTH
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A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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THE SECOND CREATION

John M. Buchanan
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July 6, 1997

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 5:17-19

"If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away: see everything has become new. All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation: that is, God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself."

I had been reading that, working on it, thinking again that these words may be the most important words in the Bible, certainly the most provocative:

- Everything old has passed away?
- Everything is new?
- We are, all of us, reconciled to God?
- We are, all of us, ambassadors of that reconciliation?

That's a bracing way to begin your day – with an ambassadorial appointment! E.B. White said somewhere that the good thing about having a religion is that you have something to do when you get up every morning.

So I was thinking about all of that first thing in the morning, about how wonderful it is that we Christians know about God's new creation, about how wonderful it is that we Christians know about our reconciliation in Christ, and how great it is that we are ambassadors of that reconciliation.

And then I picked up the newspaper and the headline that caught my eye was this: "CROATS, SERBS MAKE A POINT; THEY DON'T WANT TO LIVE TOGETHER."

The dateline was Vukovar. I was in Vukovar the week after Easter representing the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). I was never more grateful for my country, its traditions of equal justice, of separation of church and state and equal treatment of all religions, its bonds of affection and mutuality and community. A Ukranian soldier in a white UN van with blue markings picked us up at our hotel in Ocijek and drove us to Vukovar, where the UN command post for Sector E is located. Sector E is a strip of land that used to be Croatia, was invaded and occupied by the Serbian army, then partially retaken by Croatia until the UN intervened. And so it is now occupied by UN troops, mostly Pakistanis and Ukranians and Poles. A U.S. Air Force Reserve General, Jacques Klein, is the commanding officer. General Klein welcomed us to his office in a Quonset hut and told us about his assignment.

When the Serbian Army attacked Vukovar, the bombardment was particularly ferocious. Specifically targeted were public buildings, schools, churches, libraries, city halls, hospitals. Serbian soldiers entered the hospital in Vukovar and massacred 260 Croatian men, some of them in their hospital beds.

And then, Serbian people moved in and occupied what was left of Vukovar's housing. When the Croatian forces counter-attacked, the UN intervened and many Serbs remained. Some left, and as they left, they planted anti-personnel mines in their homes to welcome back the former Croatian occupants.

General Klein explained that both sides have been almost indiscriminate in the use of land mines – there are literally millions all over the countryside and in the cities – hidden, active, deadly. The UN Accords do not provide for mine clearance. So far that is a private enterprise, time-consuming and very costly. "How long," we asked him, "will it take to clear the area of all mines?" His answer was sobering. "That won't happen in our lifetime," he said.

General Klein's job is to keep the peace which mainly means being a strong enough presence to keep Croats and Serbs from shooting at each other. "What will happen when you leave?" we asked. Again, his answer was blunt and sobering. "They'll resume shooting at each other."

I am an American and a Presbyterian. I'm used to problem-solving. There is nothing we can't do, if we want to do it, I ordinarily believe. So I asked, "Are you able to do anything proactively in the direction of reconciliation?" I'll never forget his answer. "This is about hundreds of years of resentment and hatred. It's about land and nationality and ethnicity and it's about religion. In Vukovar it's about Serbian Orthodoxy and Croatia Catholicism."

"I'm an Armenian Orthodox Christian," he went on. "I figured the one thing the Serbs and Croats have in common is that they're Christians. So I figured we'd start there. I go to a different church every Sunday. I went to the local clergy and asked them to schedule a joint, community Easter service. I said we'd pay for it, provide a tent. I couldn't even get them to talk about it. So it didn't happen. To tell the truth, religion doesn't help much around here and often makes things a lot worse."

"If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation."

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Probably the most revolutionary idea in the history of the world is that God is one: that there is one creator of all that is. For most of human history, religionists have come to a different conclusion, namely that there are many gods. There are, after all, so many different people, tribes, races, nations and cultures, and they are so diametrically different and unique, it is logical that each came from a different source. Every tribe or nation has a god. Think how revolutionary it is to propose monotheism: one God, one creator of all. Why that makes everybody related. The genius of the Hebrew notion of monotheism is not only that it is intellectually interesting, it

actually changes your idea of the world. Suddenly, rival nations and races, beneath their rivalries and hatreds, are related – are family. That means that Palestinians and Jews are brothers and sisters whether they want to be or not.

The people who first came up with the idea had a lot of trouble living up to it. Their history is the account of a struggle to live as if they believed that the human race is one because God is one. To not simply act like everybody else, with their own tribal deity, busily making war, gobbling up territory and spoils, dispatching their neighbors in the name of their god.

The oneness of God is the most revolutionary idea in the world. The next most revolutionary idea is that God persists in the implications of the monotheism project. God continues to cultivate and nurture the oneness of the family. People keep fighting and killing one another. Human history continues to be a story of violence, brutality and bloodshed – with religion always playing an important, often critical role. So God tries again – comes into history and it is a new creation, a new chance.

The purpose, says one of God's more eloquent spokespersons, is to make everything new: the old is gone – there are brand new possibilities. In Jesus Christ, God has reconciled the world to himself and has appointed the people who know about it as agents, ambassadors of this new creation, this blessed possibility, this reconciliation.

And you know what? It seems like we're beginning to understand that God's reconciliation project, God's second creation, not only addresses the most critical need in the world, the need for tribes and races and nations to live in peace, but also, our deepest and most personal need as well.

Michael Lerner is a philosopher and clinical psychologist, author and publisher, who has also studied theology. His remarkable book, The Politics of Meaning, proposes that our deepest need as individuals is for relationships, community, reconciliation, and, furthermore, that the recovery of something like community and reconciliation is necessary for the renewal of our life as a nation, if not our survival – an appropriate topic on this Fourth of July weekend.

Lerner's book grew out of a research project he designed to try to understand the psychodynamics the political behavior of working people in Oakland, California. He and his partners went into the study, he says, assuming that "most Americans are motivated primarily by material self-interest. We found middle-income people deeply unhappy because they hunger to serve the common good, and to contribute something ... they hunger for community." [p. 7]

After thousands of interviews, Lerner concluded that something has happened to the soul of our nation recently. It's why we look to the past with such nostalgia. It's why the past seems somehow gentler, kinder, more human. It's why Americans love the Fourth of July with its parades, picnics, and community gatherings. What happened, Lerner says, is that we learned to turn away from one another. Some of our best thinkers are pondering it, this palpable loss of community; this turning inward and away from one another – the Balkanization of American life into competing tribes and races. Market analyst, Faith Popcorn, calls it the "cocooning" of

America – people withdrawing into private spaces, spheres, activities and away from public life. Mike Royko, in one of his memorable columns wondered out loud about how Americans could live close to one another and still not know one another. Royko thought air conditioning is the culprit. People stay indoors watching television in the summer because of air conditioning. Royko said before air conditioning, you had to sit on the front porch and you couldn't ignore your neighbors.

Lerner suggests that it may be the market capitalism to which we have turned in recent years, which he says, defines human purpose as the production of wealth, and human beings are means to that end, expendable, ultimately, when their welfare interferes with the market. You must close the plant and move it overseas no matter what it costs in human suffering, unemployment – it's simply a market decision. You can limit healthcare. God forbid that we should ever think it is a right; it's simply a market decision. He observes:

“Middle-income Americans today have far more material goods and economic benefits than we had in the past, but we feel less secure, less connected and less fulfilled. We feel more vulnerable to economic danger because we recognize that we can count less on one another to help out when times get rough.” [p. 38]

Whatever the reason, we have “become convinced that it is OK to turn our backs on the poor and needy – we have narrowed our circle of caring to our immediate family and friends. [p. 9]

There is, of course, a social price to be paid for this. We can, if we choose, continue to refuse to accept community responsibility to educate our young, gladly provide the youngster who lives in Lake Forest with a fabulous educational opportunity, but the youngster who lives on the West Side goes to school without the benefit of a guidance counselor, art teacher and if he wants to be safe, takes along his own paper towels and toilet paper.

Welfare reform, about which a lot of positive things are being said and written, has ended a sixty year commitment to provide assistance to all needy families with children according to some experts, and will move 2.6 million people, including 1.1 million children into poverty. We are proud of welfare reform and no one argues with the need to address welfare dependency and to tie employment to benefits. But we have not yet begun to address the fundamental issue – namely jobs, available employment. There are simply more poor people looking for jobs than there are jobs. That will get worse in the days ahead. And until we do so, until the public and private sector can provide work, accessible jobs with a livable wage, daycare and transportation systems, Welfare reform will, according to Peter Edelman, writing in *The Atlantic Monthly* (March 1997 - p.53), produce “more malnutrition, more crime, increased infant mortality and increased drug and alcohol abuse against women and children, and a consequent spill over of the problem into the already overloaded child welfare system and battered women's shelters.”

This reform narrows eligibility for disabled children “which will result in the removal from the rolls of 100,000 to 200,000 of the 950,000 who currently receive SSI.” Everyone knows that some tightening was necessary and warranted, but what congress passed and the President signed “will result in the loss of coverage for children who, if they were adults, would be considered

disabled. Particularly affected are children with multiple impairments, no one of which is severe enough to meet the new, more stringent criteria.”

There is a social price to be paid in suffering and depression and anger when we learn to turn our backs on one another – and, perhaps more importantly, a personal price.

Michael Lerner says, “All this turning away from one another is terrible for our souls and bad for our physical and psychological health.” Are you as struck as I am every time you read the medical statistics that document that having friends is good for your health; that people who have a circle of caring – a church, neighbors, friends with whom they have some regular contact, have a way of living longer?

Lerner observes something that ministers discover regularly – “We rush to psychiatrists, psychologists, marriage and family counselors, spiritual healers, astrologers – anyone who promises to fix our personal problems – and they often work. Why? Because the actual process of being able to discuss our private issues with someone else, and the experience of being listened to and cared about provide us with human contact and connection that partially satisfy our deep need for connection to others.” [p. 39]

“God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself. In Christ there is a new creation.”

We Christians have the audacity to believe that we live in a second creation. We have the audacity – which sometimes sounds like supreme naiveté – to believe that we are living in the reign of God, that we are already reconciled to God, that things are different from what they seem, that the truth is not enmity and hostility and brutality and violence – but peace and reconciliation and love and forgiveness. We Christians who, so often, have acted like merely another religion, joyfully dispatching one another in the name of our tribal deity – one thinks of those silly men in Northern Ireland, Protestant fanatics in orange vests and bowlers, marching through Catholic neighborhoods to celebrate a glorious Protestant victory several hundred years ago; one thinks of members of Christian anti-abortion groups blowing up clinics, or one thinks of Pat Robertson and the Christian Coalition trying to enforce, by law, the edicts and ethos of its own brand of religion – one thinks of Serbs blowing up the Roman Catholic Cathedral in Vinkovsic and Catholics retaliating by blowing up the Orthodox Cathedral down the street. Nevertheless, we Christians have the audacity to claim that God has made us ambassadors of reconciliation: that it is why we are here: that participating in this second creation is the highest, holiest purpose of our lives.

T. S. Eliot asked, in one of his most famous poems, *Choruses from the Rock*.

“What life have you if you have not life
together?
There is no life that is not in community,
And no community not lived in praise of
God.”

We Christians have the audacity to believe that God's new creation is already underway, that here and there it springs forth.

The day after our sobering visit to Vukovar, we met in the lobby of the Ocijek Community Hospital. We were greeted by two volunteers in mission from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) who are working in the hospital. Brett McMichael is a clinical psychologist who specializes in pediatric trauma. The pediatric ward, located on the top floor of the hospital, was severely damaged by mortar shells and is currently partially operational again. Brett works with children who have been traumatized by the war – children who have seen their fathers executed, their mothers raped and who are totally withdrawn, unsmiling, unfeeling, uncaring. Brett's supervisor, a Croatian psychiatrist, was proudly showing us her new facilities. I was admiring the bright, colorful pictures on the wall of flowers and kittens and butterflies when my eye was caught by a large poster which announced in Croatian and English, WARNING: DO NOT TOUCH THESE – over large pictures of the three most common mines Croatian children are likely to encounter.

But they are there. Brett's job is to start a play therapy program which is what the psychiatrists know will help these little ones. I thought about Brett and the Croatian children when I read – “God has given us the ministry of reconciliation.”

And because this congregation has the audacity to believe that in our better moments we live in this new reality, this second creation, a group of our members just returned from Northern Ireland, learning, praying, trying in some modest way to help and to symbolize God's gift of reconciliation. And because we believe, Mary Schemper Denny, our Parish Nurse, and Claudine Wagenaar, our Volunteer Coordinator, will fly to Guatemala tomorrow where Joy and Jack Houston have gone to express the hope and faith and love of all of us and where others from Fourth Church will go.

We can't all go like that, but some can. And the rest of us can support and pray for them and we can be a little more self-conscious about the way we have been turning away from one another and we can realign our hearts and enlarge our circle of caring and consciously, intentionally, bring into our circle those we have left out. And we can expand our own circle of caring, we can visit one another and minister to our neighbors and listen to one another and be present for one another in times of need, and loneliness and crisis. And we, each of us, can glory in this most extraordinary truth, that in Jesus Christ we are reconciled to God, that in him, all things are new, and that in him we have been made ambassadors of reconciliation, participants in God's second creation.

Amen.